



September 1, 2020

The Honorable Chris Turner
Committee on Higher Education
Texas House of Representatives
PO Box 2910
Austin, Texas 78768

Chairman Turner and Committee Members,

The Texas Library Association represents almost 5,000 librarians working in academic, public, school, and special libraries across the state. The following comments on Interim Charge #4, which directs the Higher Education Committee to study the prevalence of online courses and degrees in higher education, reflect our college and university librarian members' experience in this area. Specifically, we will address questions #1, #5, #6 and #9 as these relate directly to the work of librarians on campuses.

What are the existing barriers to online learning for students and faculty? What have institutions done to alleviate and eliminate these barriers? (#1)

Faculty's lack of experience with online learning technologies is a significant barrier. According to a survey conducted by the Chronicle of Higher Education in May, 37% of faculty and 84% of administrators found technical obstacles with technology and learning platforms to be an issue. In that same survey, 65% of faculty and 77% of administrators indicated students' lack of access to technology and wifi as very to somewhat challenging.

Since the pandemic began, librarians have worked closely with faculty to support them in transitioning their instruction to online platforms. Librarians' professional expertise in curating and developing online learning tools, offering online library instruction (both asynchronous and live), managing online chat and reference services, and serving as the central distribution point for technology (including devices and hotspots), proved to be invaluable as institutions pivoted to 100% online learning in a matter of weeks.

Another barrier to online learning is students' lack of access to appropriate equipment. The demand for devices at institutions far exceeds the number of devices available to students at all levels. Graduate students as well as undergraduate students look to borrow devices that have more capability than devices they own. And for a great many students, the device borrowed from their institution is their only device, other than their smartphone. Unfortunately, too many Texas students rely on a smartphone as their only tool for completing course assignments, researching projects, and taking exams.

While some colleges and universities have obtained CARES Act grants to increase the availability of devices including laptops and hotspots, this funding is not a long-term solution. One solution would be for the state to provide financial assistance to students so that they might purchase their own device.

Also, of concern is students' lack of access to affordable internet service. Those students who previously relied on wifi access on campus, were faced with challenges in connecting to the internet to do their work. Many campuses established wifi zones outside of libraries and other buildings on campus to try to provide some access; but for students who had returned home, options for wifi connections were, in some cases, extremely limited. Institutions are loaning hotspots, but again, that is not a viable long-term solution as the cost to equip all students in need would be prohibitive. Additionally, hotspots are only as good as the internet service in a particular area. While institutions offer hotspots, which connect with as many major internet providers as possible, there are many parts of the state where high speed internet is not available.

Post-pandemic, will the recent shift to online courses lead to expanded online demand and capacity? (#5)

While the pandemic has highlighted barriers to institutions' ability to successfully provide extensive online learning opportunities, as faculty and students continue to adapt, and courses improve, institutions will have an increased capability to offer robust online learning opportunities.

As Christopher Cox, dean of libraries at Clemson University, stated in a June 5 blog post on [Inside Higher Ed](#), "Libraries are perfectly positioned to assist faculty in the development of online courses. Our instructional technology game is strong, having extensive familiarity with tutorial and instructional video creation, course management systems, OER and the like. We already provide students with instruction, technologies and spaces that support digital literacy -- using technology to create and communicate. In addition, librarians are transitioning their own information literacy instruction online, and developing methods to support students and instructors in their research and classwork."

Access to affordable course materials and supplemental resources such as textbooks, course reserve materials, etc. is essential to successfully offering online courses. Librarians and instructors seek out unbundled or open access alternatives (OER) and academic libraries take the lead in building OER and programs offering authoritative, curated, and created resources at no additional cost as a free or low-cost alternative to expensive commercial textbooks.

Additionally, the idea of the \$10,000 degree relies completely on a significant number of college credit hours being obtained through dual credit or advanced placement courses taken in high school. Funding to support OER should be included in advancing this initiative. Offering grants to support faculty, librarians, and instructional designers will incentivize this program.

How can the Legislature address gaps in equity in accessing reliable, affordable Internet access? (#6)

The digital divide does still exist in Texas, and its impact is not limited to those living in rural areas of the state. For example, 18 - 20% of students at University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio don't have access to high speed internet because of cost. Loaning equipment and hotspots doesn't address the issue for those without internet access.

Institutions are the wi-fi connection points for many students, enabling them to access the software and programs needed for online courses, research materials, and university services, including online tutoring. Universities are offering students "high flex" (in-person, on campus for some classes, alternating with livestream meetings for other classes) options for learning. Participating in courses which are livestreamed, and accessing databases for research, requires a stable, fast internet

connection, and a higher-end device. Students must have the devices and access to high-speed internet to benefit from these options.

Texas must make an investment in broadband internet access throughout the state, particularly in rural and low-income areas, and find ways to address the monopolies and high prices found in the current market for these services.

Has recently adopted legislation on Open Educational Resources been able to make an impact on the quality of online education yet? (#9)

Legislation has raised awareness and interest in OER across the state. The adoption of SB 810 spotlighted the issue but lack of infrastructure, funding, and strong incentives to increase the availability of OER, means that many institutions have not invested in this cost-saving resource.

While some institutions have taken initial steps, it takes time to raise awareness, educate faculty and set up systems and processes. The grants established by SB 810 have helped but are not robust enough to make a statewide impact.

Another positive legislative initiative is OERTX, the statewide OER repository funded by HB 3652 by Chairman Turner. The launch of this valuable resource may begin to make adoption of OERs a bit less challenging.

Librarians and instructional designers have the experience and expertise needed to curate and create OER materials, train and assist faculty in OER development and use, and promote usage across campuses. These professionals are essential to any OER project, from development to ongoing management, promotion, and training. The [Texas Digital Library](#) and [other initiatives](#) are providing resources for those interested in expanding OER.

Some universities are developing internal programs to encourage development and use of OER. For example, the University of Texas – San Antonio (UTSA) Libraries is at the forefront of the OER movement on campus. The Adopt-a-Free-Textbook grant program, which began in 2016 and is spearheaded by the library, awards money to faculty who agree to use OER texts in a course for at least four semesters (most continue to use them after the grant period is over.)

UTSA Libraries partnered with [OpenStax](#), a nonprofit educational initiative based at Rice University which publishes high-quality, openly licensed college textbooks that are free online and low-cost to print. UTSA Libraries works with faculty to utilize OER from both OpenStax and other free and low-cost online textbook repositories. UTSA's \$8 million savings figure reflects textbook savings from classes taught by professors who have received grants over the last four years.

Videos produced by the UTSA Libraries help share the story of what OER can do. In [this video](#), faculty discuss the benefits of using OER when teaching their courses, from increasing student satisfaction to presenting parts of different textbooks in the same course.

[This video](#) shows how the UTSA Math Matters team benefited by combining resources from [OpenStax](#) and [WebWork](#) to create free online textbooks for College Algebra and Math for Business students, saving them \$500,000 per semester, collectively.

State-funded grants offered to support faculty development of OER need to be extended to librarians and instructional designers. Grants should be available to state and private institutions if they are

creating core materials that will be used by students and faculty at all types of institutions across the state. All OER courses and course materials supported with state funds should be easily discoverable and accessible through the state-wide repository. Funds for keeping created materials up to date should be included as part of the grant program.

In conclusion, the pandemic has brought many of the inequities and challenges faced by students seeking a post-secondary education in Texas into sharp focus. Educational outcomes for all students have been impacted, but nonwhite and lower-income students have been affected to a greater degree. The shift to online learning highlights the need of a statewide plan and funding for technology and educational resources that are accessible for all students across the state.

Sincerely,



Christina Gola
TLA President



Shirley Robinson
TLA Executive Director

Contact

Wendy Woodland
Director, Advocacy & Communication
Texas Library Association
3355 Bee Cave Rd., Suite 401
Austin, TX 78746
wendyw@txla.org
512.328.1518 ext. 146